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Jill Tomberlin

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Julie Andrews starts singing “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” and I realize that my cell phone is ringing. “Hi, Mom. Yeah, I’m in Birmingham. If there’s no major traffic I should be home by six.”

“Well, just be careful. The dishwasher is leaking water so we may have to do dinner on paper plates. Oh, when you get here, will you PLEASE talk to your brothers and sisters about tying off the popcorn strings before they put them on the tree. I have gone into the living room twice and noticed the popcorn is falling off the back of the tree because the strings aren’t tied together,” says my exasperated mother.

“Yes, Mom, I’ll take of care it if I have to do it myself. Sorry about the dishwasher, paper plates won’t matter. See you soon. Love you.”

It’s a family tradition of ours to hand-string popcorn to decorate the tree. It usually takes a couple of days to complete the strands but it’s something our family enjoys doing together. As I drive north on I-65, I remember all the popcorn stringing races we had and all the sore fingers growing up. I don’t understand why my siblings aren’t doing it correctly but figure it will be easily fixed when I get home. As for the dishwasher, it is going to be nearly impossible to get a repair man out since it’s only two days till Christmas. My mom believes family events and holidays are special. So special in fact, paper plates are prohibited.

I am eagerly greeted at the door by Jordann, my younger sister who is nine months pregnant. My siblings and I chat incessantly, catching up on everything that has been going on over the past few months. I bring up the issue of the popcorn and they insist that they have been tying it off. My twin brothers, Jonathan and Joseph, request my help in changing out a fuse in one of the Christmas tree light strands. It is quickly changed and the lights are still out.

“Hmmm, Mom, I think we need a new strand,” says Jonathan.

“Well, crap, that’s one more thing to get tomorrow.” My mother seems even more irritated than this afternoon. We enjoy a nice dinner and everyone’s off to bed.

The next day is uneventful. The new lights aren’t as important as Mom had once thought. The dishwasher is still leaking water and Dad decides to turn the water to it off. It’s about eleven o’clock; Jordann can’t sleep and has decided to stay up wrapping presents. She is sitting on the floor in front of one of the plaid wing-back chairs. The seven-foot pine tree is directly behind her and the brightly colored packages are spread out over the pale blue carpet. My dad is snoring loudly on the brown leather loveseat. Jordann has just finished wrapping a present and placing it under the tree. As she begins standing up, she notices that one of the rocking horse ornaments is swaying back and forth. She

then notices the entire tree is swaying back and forth. All of a sudden, a large brown rat crawls out of the Christmas tree. Jordann gasps and jumps into one of the chairs. “Dad, dad, wake up. It’s a rat!” Unfortunately, Jordann is so scared all she can manage to get out is a slight whisper. She finally finds her courage and awakens our father who is still in a stupor. The rat is now in front of the entertainment center which is directly in front of Dad. The rat stops and stares at Dad; all he can do is stare back. By the time Dad realizes what it is and what is going on, the varmint has run off. Meanwhile, Jordann has been so scared that she starts going into labor.

“Pam, Pam,” my Dad yells for my mother. “Take care of Jordann and get the boys up! We’re going rat hunting!” By this time there has been such a commotion the entire family is up. Dad and the boys immediately begin hunting for the rat. A thought dawns on Dad and he pulls out the dishwasher. “Aha! This is why it’s been leaking.” We all run into the kitchen. The rat had chewed into the plastic water line and had been drinking water from the top of the dishwasher. My mom and I look at each other and realize it’s the rat that has been eating the popcorn which untied the strings. We run into the living room and begin pulling the popcorn and all edible candies off of the tree. It’s then that we discover that the rat chewed through the strand of lights which

had mysteriously gone out.

Some time later, Jordann's contractions have subsided and our poor Christmas tree looks naked. "Why don't we vacuum one more time," I suggest. "I think I might sleep better." The house has been scrubbed from floor to ceiling since Mom wanted to be sure the rat had nothing to nibble on. The house is as clean as it could possibly be — the floors were swept and mopped twice, the carpets vacuumed, and any boxed foods were placed in sealed containers. Dad and the boys dig through the boxes in the garage and begin setting traps; however, the only traps on hand are mouse traps. It is soon discovered that these will not work. It is decided that we should all go to bed and not worry about the intruder. On Christmas Eve most people dream about sugarplum fairies, but we all dreamed of the Rat King.

Christmas morning we all get up and open presents. It's another family tradition to watch a movie after the sacred event of opening presents. We all gather in the den and pile onto the couches, loveseat, and oversized chairs. All of the sudden Mr. Rat dances across the kitchen tile floor to the dining room; however, we are even more shocked as he is accompanied by another rat. Grossed out, we girls scream as Dad and the boys run after the oversized rodents. It would take another three days of setting rat traps before they would

be able to kill them. Even then, the rats were too large for the traps. They would be caught and then the boys would finish them off with golf clubs.

After the incident with the rats, my parents unfortunately agreed never to string popcorn again. They didn't want to risk feeding anything else that might sneak into the house uninvited. Yes, it was a pain at times to string the popcorn, but I have a lot of fond memories of us kids doing it. Our new tradition seems to be laughing at our recollections of the "rat Christmas" and how my niece, Chloe, was almost born a Christmas baby.